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The Delta

*Don't reduce flows, augment them
-- and remember where votes are*

The Delta remains an agricultural, recreational and wildlife bonanza for one reason and only one reason.

It isn't Mother Nature.

It is the simple fact that the water on which so much of the southern Valley and Southern California is dependent has to flow through the Delta to state and federal pumps.

If south-state water interests can bypass the Delta, our 1,000 miles of waterways will become just a brackish, salty extension of the San Francisco Bay/Suisun Bay system, and agriculture will be just a fond memory.

Those are the realities that this area needs to remember as it studies the latest state/federal (CALFED Bay-Delta Program) proposals for the Delta.

San Joaquin County's diverse water interests can disagree on many things.

But they need to be unified in making sure that any proposal to bypass the Delta is, to use Assemblyman Michael Machado's appropriate description, a "nonstarter."

The Peripheral Canal was soundly rejected in a referendum on legislative authorization in the early '80s.

We need to do everything possible to make sure the latest version of it doesn't get that far.

Freshwater flows into the Delta need to be increased, not decreased.

San Joaquin County's water interests are unique.

They are not the same as those of the southern Valley's corporate megafarms or the rapacious Los Angeles-area water agencies. Nor are they the same as those of the Bay Area.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation's Central Valley Project has largely ignored San Joaquin County's interests. Just look at the San Joaquin River in the summer; its flows are controlled by the bureau's Friant Dam.

The State Water Project sending flows from the north is no better.

Both are concerned primarily with getting water from their reservoirs -- the CVP's Shasta on the Sacramento; the state's Oroville on the Feather River -- to pumps near Tracy for export south.

The Delta, with its myriad waterways, is merely the conduit, albeit an inefficient one.

That's why they'd like nothing better than a cement-lined canal to carry water around the Delta.

But, as the Environmental Defense Fund's Tom Graff says, that is "a wishful throwback to the era of big dams, sterile channels and lifeless canals."

The new canal proposal is more a matter of politics and economics than ecology.

State and federal bureaucrats can count. Population -- and votes -- are concentrated in Southern California and the Bay Area where the water is headed, not in the Valley.

Those areas want as much water as they can get as cheap as they can get it, and a canal bypassing the Delta fills the bill -- for them.

But San Joaquin County has some powerful and perhaps unexpected allies in fighting a new peripheral canal. The Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Association and others already have weighed in with their opposition.

It likely will be a long, tough fight to defeat the new canal proposal.

But, as the Central Delta Water Agency's Dante Nomellini says, we need to be willing to "go to the mat on it," because a canal "is the end of the Delta."